

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
EASTERN DISTRICT OF WASHINGTON

WILLIAM ALLENBAUGH,

Plaintiff,

v.

BNSF RAILWAY COMPANY,  
a Delaware corporation,

Defendant.

NO. CV-09-3086-LRS

**ORDER DENYING  
MOTION FOR SUMMARY  
JUDGMENT**

**BEFORE THE COURT** is the Defendant's Motion For Summary Judgment (ECF No. 38). This motion was heard with oral argument on June 1, 2011. Bahareh Samanian, Esq., argued for Plaintiff. Scott C. Cifrese, Esq., argued for Defendant.

**I. BACKGROUND**

This is a Federal Employers' Liability Act (FELA) case in which the Plaintiff, a former employee of the Defendant, BNSF Railway Company (BNSF), alleges he suffers from cumulative hip trauma as a result of his many years working for BNSF. Plaintiff contends BNSF was negligent in failing to provide him a reasonably safe place to work.

**II. DISCUSSION**

**A. Summary Judgment Standard**

The purpose of summary judgment is to avoid unnecessary trials when there

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1 is no dispute as to the facts before the court. *Zweig v. Hearst Corp.*, 521 F.2d 1129  
2 (9th Cir.), *cert. denied*, 423 U.S. 1025, 96 S.Ct. 469 (1975). Under Fed. R. Civ. P.  
3 56, a party is entitled to summary judgment where the documentary evidence  
4 produced by the parties permits only one conclusion. *Anderson v. Liberty Lobby,*  
5 *Inc.*, 477 U.S. 242, 247, 106 S.Ct. 2505 (1986); *Semegen v. Weidner*, 780 F.2d 727,  
6 732 (9th Cir. 1985). Summary judgment is precluded if there exists a genuine dispute  
7 over a fact that might affect the outcome of the suit under the governing law.  
8 *Anderson*, 477 U.S. at 248.

9 The moving party has the initial burden to prove that no genuine issue of  
10 material fact exists. *Matsushita Elec. Industrial Co. v. Zenith Radio Corp.*, 475 U.S.  
11 574, 586, 106 S.Ct. 1348 (1986). Once the moving party has carried its burden under  
12 Rule 56, "its opponent must do more than simply show that there is some  
13 metaphysical doubt as to the material facts." *Id.* The party opposing summary  
14 judgment must go beyond the pleadings to designate specific facts establishing a  
15 genuine issue for trial. *Celotex Corp. v. Catrett*, 477 U.S. 317, 325, 106 S.Ct. 2548  
16 (1986).

17 In ruling on a motion for summary judgment, all inferences drawn from the  
18 underlying facts must be viewed in the light most favorable to the nonmovant.  
19 *Matsushita*, 475 U.S. at 587. Nonetheless, summary judgment is required against a  
20 party who fails to make a showing sufficient to establish an essential element of a  
21 claim, even if there are genuine factual disputes regarding other elements of the  
22 claim. *Celotex*, 477 U.S. at 322-23.

23  
24 **B. Is There Sufficient Evidence To Create Genuine Issue Of Material**  
25 **Fact Re Breach Of Duty?**

26 The FELA provides in relevant part:

27 Every common carrier by railroad while engaged in commerce  
28

between any of the several States . . . shall be liable in damages to any person suffering injury while he is employed by such carrier in such commerce . . . for such injury . . . resulting in whole or in part from the negligence of any of the officers, agents, or employees of such carrier, or by reason of any defect or insufficiency, due to its negligence, in its cars, engines, appliances, machinery, track, road bed, works, boats, wharves, or other equipment.

45 U.S.C. § 51.

The FELA is not a workers' compensation statute, *Consolidated Rail Corp. v. Gottshall*, 512 U.S. 532, 543, 114 S.Ct. 2396 (1994), nor does it make the employer the insurer of the safety of its employees while they are on duty. The basis of liability "is . . . negligence, not the fact that injuries occur." *Ellis v. Union Pacific Ry. Co.*, 329 U.S. 649, 653, 67 S.Ct. 598 (1947). In a FELA case, the plaintiff bears the burden of proving the existence of a duty owed by the defendant, a breach of that duty (that is, conduct unreasonable in the face of a foreseeable risk of harm), causation, and damage. *Gottshall*, 512 U.S. at 538.

Under the FELA, a railroad employer owes its employees a duty to provide a safe place to work. *Atchison, T. & S.F. Railway Co. v. Buell*, 480 U.S. 557, 558, 107 S.Ct. 1410 (1987). A railroad breaches this duty when it fails to use ordinary care under the circumstances or fails to do what a reasonably prudent person would have done under the circumstances to make the working environment safe. *Tiller v. Atlantic C.L.R. Co.*, 318 U.S. 54, 67, 63 S.Ct. 444 (1943). In other words, a railroad breaches its duty when it knew, or by the exercise of due care, should have known that the prevalent standards at use were inadequate to protect the plaintiff and similarly situated employees. *Urie v. Thompson*, 337 U.S. 163, 182, 69 S.Ct. 1018 (1949). According to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in *Mullahon v. Union Pacific R.R.*, 64 F.3d 1358, 1364 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1995), quoting *Green v. River Terminal Ry.*, 763 F.2d 805, 808 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1985):

The test of foreseeability does not require that the negligent person should have been able to foresee the injury in the precise

1 form in which it in fact occurred. Rather it is sufficient if the  
2 negligent person might reasonably have foreseen that an injury  
might occur.

3 FELA does not permit an employer to raise the defense of assumption of risk.  
4 45 U.S.C. §54. On the other hand, 45 U.S.C. §53 authorizes the employer to assert  
5 a contributory negligence defense with the understanding that an employee who is  
6 guilty of contributory negligence is not barred from recovery, although his damages  
7 are to be reduced in proportion to the amount of negligence attributable to him. An  
8 employee's voluntary, knowledgeable acceptance of a dangerous condition that is  
9 necessary for him to perform his duties constitutes an assumption of risk. On the  
10 other hand, contributory negligence is a careless act or omission on the employee's  
11 part tending to add new dangers to conditions that the employer negligently created  
12 or permitted to exist. *Taylor v. Burlington N. R.R. Co.*, 787 F.2d 1309, 1316 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir.  
13 1986).

14 BNSF contends Plaintiff has no competent evidence that BNSF breached any  
15 duty to him. BNSF asserts the opinion of Plaintiff's expert, Robert O. Andres, Ph.D.,  
16 that BNSF did not properly assess and/or respond to ergonomic risk factors to which  
17 Plaintiff was exposed, is not competent evidence that BNSF breached a duty of care  
18 to Plaintiff. According to BNSF, Dr. Andres' expert analysis does not raise a genuine  
19 issue of material fact that Plaintiff's workplace was not reasonably safe in light of the  
20 normal requirements of Plaintiff's job. BNSF asserts that Dr. Andres offers nothing  
21 but conjecture and speculation to support his position that BNSF's assessment of and  
22 response to ergonomic risk factors was unreasonable in light of the duties required  
23 of a trainman. Because Dr. Andres admits he has no "exact knowledge of the  
24 duration of Plaintiff's exposures to any of the job tasks on any given day for any past  
25 time period," and only knows that Plaintiff "repetitively used his arms, legs and feet  
26 over his 33 year career," BNSF asserts it is "incredible" to suggest Plaintiff's  
27 cumulative hip trauma would have been avoided had BNSF assessed and/or  
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1 responded to ergonomic risk factors in some different way.

2 Dr. Andres is no stranger to FELA cases. Just recently in *Abernathy v. Union*  
3 *Pacific R.R. Co.*, 2011 WL 1397439 at \*3-4 (E.D. Ark. 2011), a district court declined  
4 to exclude Dr. Andres' opinions, noting that he was prepared to offer evidence that  
5 the railroad's actions with respect to addressing ergonomic risk factors for trackmen  
6 were unreasonable and fell short of industry best practices and that this was relevant  
7 to the question of "reasonable foreseeability of harm" and duty of care.<sup>1</sup> In arriving  
8 at this conclusion, the court noted that in a previous FELA case in the Eastern District  
9 of Arkansas, *Graham v. Union Pacific R. Co.*, 2008 WL 4418930 (E.D. Ark. 2008),  
10 expert evidence that risk could have been diminished by an ergonomics program was  
11 deemed relevant. In *Graham* at \*2, the court noted:

12 [Plaintiff's expert] is prepared to offer evidence that Union  
13 Pacific knew or should have known that its failure to implement  
14 an ergonomics program could result in increased risk of  
15 repetitive motion trauma to its employees engaged in  
16 particular activities. [The expert] has relied on reports from  
17 the Association of American Railroads [AAR] regarding ergonomics  
18 and cumulative trauma. [He] has also relied on document  
19 from Union Pacific's "Cumulative Trauma Disorder Prevention  
20 Task Force," which appears to have been charged with  
21 developing a cumulative trauma prevention policy and  
22 identifying and preventing ergonomic hazards in the work  
23 place. [H]e has presented evidence on the disputed issue  
24 of whether Union Pacific knew or should have known that  
25 the lack of ergonomics training exposed [plaintiff] to a  
26 hazardous working environment. . . . [Plaintiff's] case is  
27 based on the argument that the nature of his work increased  
28 the risk of back injury but that risk could have been  
diminished by an ergonomics program. In this case,  
whether the absence of ergonomic training for [plaintiff]  
was a cause of his injuries and whether Union Pacific knew  
or should have known that absence of training increased  
[plaintiff's] risk level are genuine issues of material fact.  
Therefore, [the expert's] testimony is relevant to a material  
issue in this case.

In the instant case, Dr. Andres is prepared to offer the same kind of evidence.

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<sup>1</sup> In the case at bar, BNSF has not directed a *Daubert* motion at Dr. Andres  
challenging either his qualifications or the reliability of his methodology.

1 His report analyzes whether Plaintiff “was exposed to ergonomic risk factors during  
2 his work with BNSF” and “what manner of comprehensive safety and health program  
3 BNSF had in place to systematically deal with ergonomic issues.” (ECF No. 40-4 at  
4 p. 2). The “latter analysis compares BNSF ergonomics efforts to those of other  
5 companies who have sought ergonomic consultation to improve their ergonomics  
6 situation.” (*Id.*). Dr. Andres summarizes the “[r]esults of the literature and document  
7 reviews . . . on the basis of when BNSF either knew or should have known about the  
8 presence of ergonomic risk factors and prevention of WMSDs [work-related  
9 musculoskeletal disorders] and what steps BNSF should have taken which were not  
10 taken.” (*Id.* at p. 3). He relies on AAR documents regarding ergonomics and  
11 cumulative trauma disorders (CTDs). (*Id.* at pp. 5, 9 and 11).<sup>2</sup> He also relies on  
12 various BNSF documents related to ergonomics in the work place (*Id.* at pp. 5-6; 33-  
13 39), noting, among other things, that “Santa Fe Railway developed an ergonomics  
14 program manual in 1995, indicating their awareness of ergonomic principles at a  
15 corporate level.” (*Id.* at p. 34). Dr. Andres’ report is sufficient to create a genuine  
16 issue of material fact as to what BNSF knew or should have known about whether its  
17 ergonomic training program was timely enough and adequate to reduce the risk of  
18 CTDs in individuals like the Plaintiff.

19 BNSF does not dispute that Plaintiff’s normal job tasks exposed him to  
20 ergonomic risks. As such, BNSF contends “[t]he issue for purposes of this motion  
21 is whether the ergonomic risks to which Plaintiff was exposed were unreasonable in  
22 light of the normal requirements of Plaintiff’s job, such that [P]laintiff’s workplace  
23 was not reasonably safe.” BNSF asserts that Dr. Andres’ opinions do not answer this  
24 question. The question to which Dr. Andres’ opinions are directed, and which a jury

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26 <sup>2</sup> AAR is the trade association for the railroads. According to Andres’ report,  
27 BNSF has been a member of AAR or its predecessor association “for years.”  
28 (Andres Report at p. 34).



1 should answer, is whether BNSF should have and could have taken measures to  
2 reduce those ergonomic risks and if it failed to do so, whether that rendered Plaintiff's  
3 work place not reasonably safe.

4 Unlike the case cited by BNSF, *Lewis v. CSX Transportation, Inc.*, \_\_\_\_\_  
5 F.Supp.2d \_\_\_\_, 2011 WL 882849 at \*19 (S.D. Ohio 2011), the Plaintiff in the case  
6 at bar has presented enough evidence to create a genuine issue of material fact that  
7 BNSF "failed to do what a reasonably prudent employer would have done under the  
8 circumstances to improve safety in the working environment." In granting summary  
9 judgment to the defendant railroad, the *CSX* court distinguished its case from  
10 *Aparicio v. Norfolk & Western Ry. Co.*, 84 F.3d 803 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1996), where there was  
11 additional evidence that, when viewed in a light most favorable to the plaintiff in that  
12 case, showed that despite its "ergonomics program," the defendant railroad (Norfolk  
13 & Western) did not do enough to ameliorate risks about which it knew or should have  
14 known. That additional evidence included the testimony of an ergonomics expert  
15 which showed the plaintiff's job involved "risk factors accepted in the biomechanical  
16 and ergonomics community for upper extremity cumulative trauma disorders such as  
17 carpal tunnel syndrome and epicondylitis," and that there were known remedial  
18 measures the railroad could have implemented to reduce plaintiff's risk of developing  
19 such disorders. 2011 WL 882849 at \*18, citing and quoting *Aparicio*, 84 F.3d at 811-  
20 812. In the case at bar, Dr. Andres is an ergonomics expert who intends to testify  
21 along the same lines with regard to lower extremity (hip) cumulative trauma disorder.

22 BNSF asserts that Plaintiff has not and cannot demonstrate any deviation from  
23 industry practice by BNSF with respect to Plaintiff's work environment, and Plaintiff  
24 has not and cannot point to any alternative work methods or equipment used by any  
25 other Class I railroad during the time Plaintiff was working that are proven to be  
26 "safe" as compared to BNSF's methods and equipment. While it may be that industry  
27 practice is a relevant consideration in the determination of whether BNSF's work  
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1 environment was reasonably safe, it is not dispositive. Put another way, just because  
2 BNSF was essentially doing what every other Class I railroad was doing in terms of  
3 ergonomics in the workplace does not necessarily mean BNSF was providing a  
4 reasonably safe workplace. A jury should decide whether the risks that were not  
5 assessed by BNSF were unsafe, or whether those risks could have reasonably been  
6 avoided in light of the normal requirements of a trainman's job.<sup>3</sup>

7  
8 **C. Are FELA Claims Related To Ballast Precluded By The Federal**  
9 **Railway Safety Act (FRSA)?**

10 BNSF asserts it is entitled to at least partial summary judgment to the extent  
11 Plaintiff's FELA claims are based on walking on ballast.<sup>4</sup> Ballast is the stone or  
12 other material placed underneath and around railroad tracks to provide the structural  
13 support, drainage and erosion protection necessary for safe rail travel. *Nickels v.*  
14 *Grand Trunk Western Railroad, Inc.*, 560 F.3d 426, 428 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2009). BNSF  
15 contends ballast-related claims are precluded by the FRSA, 49 U.S.C. §20101 *et seq.*  
16 Plaintiff claims that for many years he worked on surfaces which were uneven,  
17 without uniform ballast, a mixture of dirt, rock and vegetation covered with debris,  
18 sloped, without dedicated walkways, and with other defective conditions which  
19 stressed his hip. He further claims BNSF violated WAC (Washington Administrative  
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21 <sup>3</sup> The mere fact BNSF knew that a portion of its employees had developed  
22 cumulative hip trauma does not mean BNSF knew or should have known that the  
23 particular work Plaintiff was assigned put him at risk for developing cumulative  
24 hip trauma. *CSX* at \*16.

25 <sup>4</sup> Plaintiff alleges in his Second Amended Complaint (ECF No. 61) that his  
26 cumulative hip trauma was due to variety of work-related activities including  
27 aligning draw bars, climbing ladders, throwing switches, operating hand brakes,  
28 riding cuts of cars, changing knuckles, in addition to walking on ballast "in yards  
and local industries," and walking up and down sloped ballast.



Code) 480-60-035 by maintaining defective, unsafe and improperly maintained walkways.

If a cause of action would be preempted by the FRSA if brought under state law, the cause is likewise precluded by the FRSA if it is brought under the FELA. *Nickels*, 560 F.3d at 428. Under this analysis, for FRSA regulations to preclude a FELA claim, a party “must establish more than that they ‘touch upon’ or ‘relate to’ that subject matter,” and must show that “the federal regulations substantially subsume the subject matter” of the claim. *CSX Transp., Inc. v. Easterwood*, 507 U.S. 658, 664, 113 S.Ct. 1732 (1993).

In *Nickels*, the plaintiffs brought claims under the FELA arguing their employers had “failed to provide a safe working environment by using large mainline ballast- instead of smaller yard ballast- underneath and adjacent to tracks receiving heavy foot traffic” and that they suffered permanent injuries as a result. The Sixth Circuit examined the regulation prescribed by the Secretary of Transportation relating to ballast, 49 C.F.R. §213.103, which provides:

Ballast; general. Unless it is otherwise structurally supported, all track shall be supported by material which will-

(a) Transmit and distribute the load of the track and railroad rolling equipment to the subgrade;

(b) Restrain the track laterally, longitudinally, and vertically under dynamic loads imposed by railroad rolling equipment and thermal stress exerted by the rails;

(c) Provide adequate drainage for the track;

(d) Maintain proper track crosslevel, surface, and alinement.

The Sixth Circuit observed that “[r]ather than prescribing ballast sizes for certain types or classes of track, the regulation leaves the matter to the railroads’ discretion so long as the ballast performs the enumerated support functions,” and “[i]n this way, the regulation substantially subsumes the issue of ballast size.”

1 *Nickels*, 560 F.3d at 431. Accordingly, the Sixth Circuit found that 49 C.F.R.  
2 §213.103 covered the issue of ballast size and precluded the plaintiffs' FELA claims  
3 that defendant failed to provide a safe working environment by using large mainline  
4 ballast- instead of smaller yard ballast- underneath and adjacent to tracks receiving  
5 heavy foot traffic. The Sixth Circuit also noted, however, that the plaintiffs had not  
6 brought claims alleging negligence "in the railroads' use of oversized ballast in areas  
7 completely separate from those where track stability and support were concerned,"  
8 *Id.* at 432, indicating such claims are distinguishable and suggesting they would not  
9 be precluded by 49 C.F.R. §213.103.

10 In a very recent case, *Brenner v. Consolidated Rail Corp.*, 2011 WL 1474296  
11 (E.D. Pa. 2011), the plaintiff alleged in his complaint that he was exposed to  
12 "excessive and harmful cumulative trauma to his knees due to . . . walking on uneven  
13 or unleveled ballast." Relying on the Sixth Circuit's decision in *Nickels*, the district  
14 court held that to the extent Plaintiff's claims were predicated upon allegations of  
15 negligence regarding the nature and size of ballast used for track stability, support  
16 and drainage- including mainline, secondary, and yard track- such claims were  
17 precluded by 49 C.F.R. Section 213.103. *Id.* at \*7. The plaintiff was, however,  
18 allowed to pursue his ballast-related claims to the extent they related "to ballast being  
19 used in areas completely separate from those where track support, stability and  
20 drainage are concerned." *Id.*

21 Here, in the case at bar, Plaintiff says he is not making a claim that BNSF  
22 should have used a different sized ballast underneath and adjacent to the tracks, that  
23 is, a different sized ballast to support and stabilize the tracks. Plaintiff says his claim  
24 is a wholly separate and distinct one that BNSF failed to provide safe and suitable

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1 walkways in the railroad yards in which he worked.<sup>5</sup> One of Plaintiff's requests for  
 2 production at issue in his recent motion to compel was a request for all documents  
 3 relating to the size and quality of yard ballast used in the Wenatchee, Spokane,  
 4 Wishram, and Yakima yards from 2001 to present. *Nickels* does not appear to  
 5 preclude ballast-related claims involving "areas completely separate from those where  
 6 track support, stability and drainage are concerned," and that would seem to include  
 7 certain areas within a railroad yard.

8 That said, the court is not persuaded *Nickels* is even controlling in the Ninth  
 9 Circuit. In a recent decision out of the District of Montana, *Abromeit v. Montana Rail*  
 10 *Link*, 2010 WL 3724425 (D. Mont. 2010), one of the plaintiff's claims was that while  
 11 he was performing a walking inspection of a railroad yard, he lost his footing when  
 12 the surface of the track adjacent to a new railroad tie gave way, causing him injury.  
 13 The Montana district court held this claim was not precluded by 49 C.F.R. §213.103  
 14 because whether the area where the plaintiff fell was safe for workers was not  
 15 substantially subsumed by the regulations on ballast construction. *Id.* at \*5. The  
 16 Montana district court noted that a California district court had concluded, and the  
 17 Ninth Circuit had confirmed, "the concern that employees have for a safe working  
 18 environment" is not directly addressed by the ballast regulations under the FRSA.  
 19 *Id.*, citing and quoting *S.P. Transp. Co. v. Pub. Util. Commn. of Cal.*, 647 F.Supp.  
 20 1220, 1225 (N.D. Cal. 1986), *aff'd*, 820 F.2d 1111 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1987). According to the  
 21 Montana district court:

22 While MRL relies on *Nickels*, given the Ninth Circuit's  
 23 opinion affirming the California regulations requiring  
 24 walkways around tracks for worker safety, it would be  
 inappropriate to rely on the reasoning in *Nickels*, to  
 bar this claim by Abromeit. MRL may have been in full

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25  
 26 <sup>5</sup> In his report, Dr. Andres compares walking ballast with mainline ballast.  
 27 (Andres Report at pp. 14-17).

1 compliance with the ballast regulations, but such compliance  
2 merely “insure[s] that tracks have adequate support.” *S.P.*  
3 *Transp. Co.*, 647 F.Supp. at 1225. Compliance with the  
regulations does not address the issue of workplace safety  
raised by Abromeit.

4 *Abromeit* at \*5.

5 The Montana district court also relied on *Davis v. Union Pacific R. Co.*, 598  
6 F.Supp.2d 955 (E.D. Ark. 2009), where the court found a plaintiff’s FELA claim for  
7 an injury he suffered while walking on loose ballast was not precluded by the FRSA,  
8 agreeing the issue of walkways is not covered by the regulation concerning ballast.  
9 The *Davis* court concluded that: “Plaintiff’s FELA claim concerns defendant’s failure  
10 to provide a reasonably safe workplace by failing to provide safe walkways on which  
11 to perform his duties. The regulation does not touch, cover or substantially subsume  
12 the matter of employee walkways or yard walkway conditions.” *Id.* at 959. Among  
13 the cases relied upon by the *Davis* court was the Northern District of California’s  
14 decision in *S.P. Transp. Co. v. Pub. Util. Commn. of Cal.*, 647 F.Supp. 1220, 1225  
15 (N.D. Cal. 1986), *aff’d*, 820 F.2d 1111 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1987). *Id.* at 959-60.

16 Even if Plaintiff’s ballast-related claims do not fall within the exception  
17 apparently carved out by *Nickels*, per existing Ninth Circuit authority, those claims  
18 are not precluded.

### 19 20 **III. CONCLUSION**

21 For the reasons set forth above, Defendant’s Motion For Summary Judgment  
22 (ECF No. 38) is **DENIED**. A jury will determine the weight to be given to Dr.  
23 Andres’ opinions in its resolution of the issues of material fact identified above.

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**IT IS SO ORDERED.** The District Executive is directed to enter this order and forward copies to counsel.

**DATED** this 6th of June, 2011.

*s/Lonny R. Suko*

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LONNY R. SUKO  
United States District Judge